

Hierarchies of Power in Online Discussion Fora

Dr Helen Newsome (h.newsome@aston.ac.uk)

Prof Tim Grant (t.d.grant@aston.ac.uk)

Aim of Research:

To develop new ways of understanding and mapping the linguistic performance of power in anonymous online discussion fora.

Previous work – Dr Ria Perkins:

Literature review of research on language and power identified a set of low-level linguistic features. These features were extracted using computational scripts. Features include:

- Hedges e.g. ‘I think’, ‘It seemed like’, ‘sort of’
- Hesitation forms e.g. ‘uh’, ‘um’, ‘well’
- Polite forms e.g. ‘sir’, ‘please’
- Intensifiers e.g. ‘very’, ‘definitely’, ‘surely’

Results: no clear correlation between these low-level features and power dimensions identified in the datasets studied in this phase of the project.

Why? Many of the low-level linguistic features identified in the literature are **multi-functional in nature** which complicates results. Perkins also highlighted that power is **not a binary concept** but is **multi-dimensional**.

Current Project:

Next stage of project – adopted a different approach - qualitative analysis using principles from CDA and pragmatics.

Analysed and manually tagged three corpora (all anonymous online discussion fora with varying degrees of anonymity):

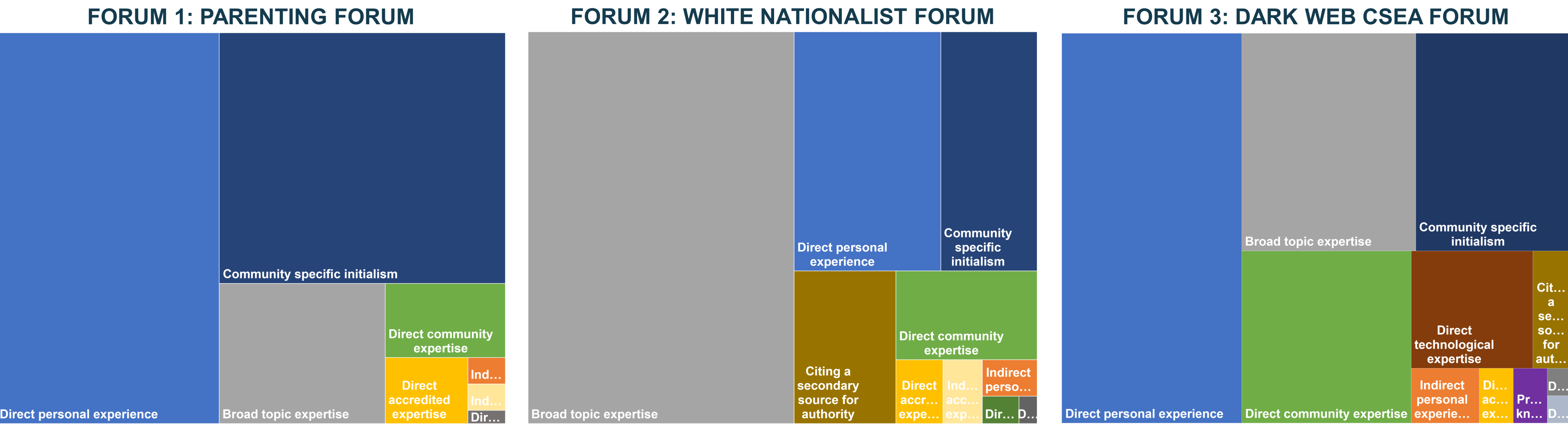
- Forum 1 (F1): Clear web, parenting forum, non-criminal.
- Forum 2 (F2): Clear web, white nationalist forum, some ‘criminal’ discussions.
- Forum 3 (F3): Dark Web, child abuse forum, all discussion criminal.

Total dataset = 160,000 words

Results: We found that individuals can draw upon **different resources in the performance of power** and that **multiple hierarchies of power** may coexist in an online fora.

Resources of Power:		
Topic expertise through personal experience* <i>I was involved with Bulgarian Nationalism for a long time. (F2)</i>	Community Expertise* Includes use of community specific initialisms <i>I informed SS [social services] as SW [social worker] said that their legal term would take weeks (F1)</i>	Broad topic expertise <i>Morality is subjective and changes from culture to culture. (F3)</i>
Technological expertise* <i>Thankfully I've found TOR and truecrypt (F3)</i>	Veteran power <i>We have looked after quite a few [...] children over our 33 years of fostering ... (F1)</i>	Accredited expertise* <i>I know two foster carers who take newborn babies. (F1-indirect)</i>
Possession of private knowledge <i>Just so nobody gets worried, [User X] will be offline for 6 or 7 days. (F3)</i>	Citing a secondary source for authority <i>As Voltaire said it is difficult to free fools from the chains they revere. (F2)</i>	Subject of law enforcement activity* <i>I was arrested a few years ago for ... (F2)</i>
(* indicates this can be ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’, where indirect expertise is a claim to knowledge of a person or situation which would be the basis of a direct claim.)		

Cross-Community Distribution of Power Resources:



Hierarchies of Power in Individuals:

Analysis of the claims of power made by individuals across the fora shows that hierarchies of power exist in which some users might be seen as **more powerful** than others.

In each forum, there exist **high-resource individuals** and **low-resource individuals**. Speculatively, access to power resources may be **constrained** by a user’s history or by the topic or content of an interaction.

Furthermore, users might consistently display **idiosyncratic** use of power claims. This may be useful in authorship analyses.

	Forum 1: Parenting	Forum 2: White Nationalist	Forum 3: DW CSEA
Users who make no claims of power	1	3	2
Users who make claim to 1 source of power	5	10	0
Users who make claim to 2 sources of power	7	6	4
Users who make claim to 3 sources of power	0	3	1
Users who make claim to 4 sources of power	1	1	0

Conclusions

- Claims to power **differ** between communities – **there’s no one way of being powerful**.
- High-resource individuals are **rare**.
- This resource model of power is a useful analytic tool with many potential applications.

What next?

- We are trying to automate tagging of forum texts so we can examine corpora at scale.
- We are planning to examine if there are any correlation between claims of power and individuals’ communicative practices.

